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ALLAN H. MACCLAINÉ

**The Christis Kirk Tradition:
Its Evolution in Scots Poetry To Burns.**

Part III

*The Early Eighteenth Century:
Allan Ramsay and his Followers*

The eighteenth century dawned inauspiciously for Scotland. She was an economically poor country, suffering from a sense of injured pride and political betrayal as a result of the parliamentary Union with England (1707), which cancelled out at a stroke of the pen the cherished independence for which Scots had been fighting and dying for a thousand years. But although the Union, having reduced Scotland politically to the status of a British province, did not immediately bring the hoped-for material benefits, it did produce a remarkable cultural renaissance. The causes of this renaissance were, of course, complex. It was made possible partly by the gradual growth of a literate middle class, partly by the development of a fine system of local schools which eventually turned Scotland into a nation of educated farmers and tradesmen generations ahead of England. But this cultural resurgence resulted largely from the desire of a small, politically impotent nation, threatened with assimilation by its larger neighbor, to reassert its ancient cultural identity among the nations of Europe.

Eighteenth-century Scotland's urge to assert itself culturally found expression in several, often apparently contradictory, ways. One of these ways was through a great upsurge of interest in the national poetic heritage. That interest had, of course, continued to thrive on the folk level; but on the educated level it had been largely dormant for over a hundred years, showing itself only sporadically among the landed gentry, as we have noted. The first tangible sign of the new movement was the publication in Edinburgh of the earliest of a formidable series of anthologies of Scots poetry, James Watson's *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems, both Ancient and Modern*, a truly epoch-making work which appeared in three parts in 1706, 1709, and 1711. Watson's publication proves that by the time of the Union a considerable reading public interested in Scots poetry had developed.

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Significantly enough, Watson gave the place of honor in his collection, as the first poem in the first volume, to *Christis Kirk on the Green*.

The work of Watson in publicizing Scots poetry was almost immediately taken over by the versatile Allan Ramsay, who started life as a wigmaker and rapidly developed into a successful poet, editor, and bookseller. Ramsay soon became, in fact, the leading light, the prime mover and pioneer of the entire vernacular revival, giving it both its original impetus and its final direction. Though Ramsay was by no means a first-rate poet himself, the historical importance of his work, both as poet and editor, can scarcely be overestimated. And among his many and extremely versatile contributions to the development of Scots poetry, his work in the *Christis Kirk* tradition was of profound importance.

Allan Ramsay's contribution to the *Christis Kirk* genre was a two-fold one: he acted both as an indefatigable editor and publicizer and as an original poet within the tradition. As an editor, Ramsay's work began in 1718¹ when he brought out a new edition of *Christis Kirk on the Green*, to which he added a supplemental canto of his own composition (written in 1715). Then, later in the same year, Ramsay produced another new canto and reissued the poem in three cantos, Canto I being the original fifteenth-century poem, while Cantos II and III were continuations of his own. So successful were these first two editions of *Christis Kirk* that Ramsay continued to bring out successive editions of all three cantos. In 1720 he repeated the 1718 edition; in 1721 and again in 1722, he reprinted the entire work as part of *Poems by Allan Ramsay*. Finally, in 1724, he included the original fifteenth-century poem in his *Ever Green*, a pioneering anthology exclusively made up of ancient Scottish poems.² For this collection Ramsay transcribed the text directly from the Bannatyne Manuscript instead of from the more or less corrupt seventeenth-century printed sources, and was thus responsible for the earliest printing of the Bannatyne text of *Christis Kirk*.

These labors of Ramsay in editing and publicizing the text of *Christis Kirk on the Green* made it unquestionably the best known and loved of ancient Scottish poems, if it had not been that before. And his lead was followed by a host of other editors and publishers, who continued to reprint the poem (sometimes with, and sometimes

¹ On this date, formerly thought to be 1716, see Andrew Gibson, *New Light on Allan Ramsay* (Edinburgh, 1927), pp. 107-111.

² For data on all of these editions, see Wm. Geddie, *A Bibliography of Middle Scots Poets*, Scottish Text Soc., O.S. 61 (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 96-98.

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without Ramsay's additions) throughout the century, other editions appearing in 1748, ca. 1750, 1763, 1768, 1782, 1783, 1783, 1786, 1786, 1794, 1796, and 1799.³ In thus giving the poem broad publicity and spreading its fame throughout the educated classes in Scotland, Ramsay gave tremendous new impetus to the whole *Christis Kirk* tradition at a time when it might, quite conceivably, have declined altogether. But Ramsay did more than this: through his original continuations of the poem, he demonstrated that this ancient genre was still adaptable as a vehicle for modern Scots poets, and he reversed the late seventeenth-century tendency of the tradition to dwindle into songs of *The Blythsome Bridal* type.

The contents of Ramsay's two *Christis Kirk* cantos (twenty-four stanzas each) may be summarized briefly.⁴ In Canto II he picks up the story at the point where the original leaves off, with the brawl still in progress. In his four opening stanzas Ramsay introduces a terrible figure, "the bauld Good-wife of *Braith*," who rushes into the fray armed with "a great Kail Gully" (cabbage knife) and calls upon the men to desist on pain of dire injury. After some discussion and some brandishing of the persuasive "Kail Gully," the good-wife prevails and peace is restored. At this point a fiddler is called in, and the next section of the canto (stanzas 5 to 10) describes a lively dance on the green. There is some grotesquely comic and occasionally coarse commentary here on a few of the village characters who participate, including the foppish tailor who had seen court dancing and fancied himself as an expert:

<p><i>Furth</i> started neist a pensy Blade, And out a Maiden took, They said that he was <i>Falkland</i> bred, And danced by the Book . . .</p>	<p><i>dapper</i></p>
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At stanza 11 night falls and the party retires indoors to the alehouse where the fun goes on, some continuing the dance while others, including "Tam Lutter" (a character carried over from the earlier poem) and the self-important parish clerk, get thoroughly drunk. In stanzas 18 to 20 we see the weary folk enjoying a late festive supper; while the last four stanzas portray the ceremonial "bedding" of the bride,⁵ with some general remarks on the aftermath of late drinking and courting

³ For bibliographical data, see Geddie, pp. 98-101.

⁴ For the best text of Ramsay's *Christis Kirk*, see *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, edd. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver, Scottish Text Soc., 3rd Ser. 19 (Edinburgh, 1950), I, 57-82. This edition is hereafter cited as *Works*.

⁵ Ramsay assumes that the village celebration has been occasioned by a wedding, though there is no indication of this in the 15th-century poem.

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among the villagers. Canto III opens with a very humorous description of the folk rising groggily next morning, suffering from the after-effects of the celebration. This canto, which is rather miscellaneous in content and loosely organized, is perhaps best summed up in Ramsay's own note:

Curious to know how my Bridal Folks would look next Day after the Marriage, I attempted this third *Canto*, which opens with a Description of the Morning. Then the Friends come and present their Gifts to the new married Couple. A View is taken of one Girl (*Kirsh*) who had come fairly off, and of *Mause* who had stumbled with the Laird. Next a new Scene of Drinking is represented, and the young Good-man is creel'd.⁶ Then the Character of the Smith's Ill-natured Shrew is drawn, which leads in the Description of riding the Stang.⁷ Next *Magy Murdy* has an exemplary Character of a good wise Wife. Deep drinking and bloodless Quarrels make an end of an old Tale.⁸

Ramsay's continuation of *Christis Kirk on the Green* is an entertaining and skillful piece of work. Ramsay equals the original poem in the sharp realism of his description; however, he fails to achieve the magnificent rollicking tempo and verve of his model. His verses tend to move more slowly, to be somewhat gossipy, and to appear contrived in spots. This effect was perhaps inevitable when we consider that Ramsay was writing in what might be called an antiquarian spirit. He was attempting to compose a sequel to a poem already three hundred years old, to imitate its subject matter, style, and, to some extent, its language. (Though Ramsay did not try to write in fifteenth-century Scots, he did affect a slightly archaic diction.) Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that his added cantos lack the spontaneity of the original. Furthermore, Ramsay slightly overemphasized the coarseness inherent in his material. The element of coarseness is present, of course, in all of the earlier *Christis Kirk* poems, and necessarily so—otherwise they would not be true to the kind of life they portray. But

⁶ "For Merryment, a Creel or Basket is bound, full of Stones, upon his Back; and if he has acted a manly Part, his young Wife with all imaginable Speed cuts the Cords, and relieves him from the Burthen. If she does not, he's rallied for a Fumbler." (Ramsay's note in *Works*, I, 78.)

⁷ "The Riding of the Stang on a Woman that hath beat her Husband, is as I have described it, by one's riding upon a Sting, or a long Piece of Wood, carried by two others on their Shoulders, where, like a Herald, he proclaims the Woman's Name, and the Manner of her unnatural Action." (Ramsay's note in *Works*, I, 80.)

⁸ *Works*, I, 74.

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at times Ramsay pushes this element too far, and occasionally seems to verge on the merely vulgar.

Despite these weaknesses, however, Ramsay's continuation of *Christis Kirk on the Green* is a remarkable achievement. Though not a great poet, Ramsay was a clever and competent one who produced several very good things, this being one of his best. Certainly it was a daring and ambitious undertaking, beset with difficulties. And although Ramsay did not have the genius to recapture quite the tone, the movement, the exhilaration of his model, he did turn out a reasonable imitation. For the most part, he handles the difficult stanza form with a deftness that is wholly admirable, though there are a few rough spots here and there. The opening stanza of Canto II, for example, is brilliantly done, making a swift transition from the end of the earlier poem:

BUT there had been mair Blood and Skaith,	<i>burt</i>
Sair Harship and great Spulie,	<i>mischance; spoil</i>
And mony a ane had gotten his Death	
By this unsonsie Tooly:	<i>unlucky fight</i>
But that the bauld Good-wife of Braith,	<i>bold</i>
Arm'd wi' a great Kail Gully,	<i>cabbage knife</i>
Came bellyflaught, and loot an Aith,	<i>swooping down; oath</i>
She'd gar them a' be hooly	<i>be quiet</i>
Fou fast that day.	

These vigorous lines will perhaps suffice to illustrate the style of Ramsay's poem at its best. It should be noted that he departs from the stanza form of the original *Christis Kirk* in two respects. Ramsay makes no attempt, of course, to carry on the elaborate alliteration of his model, a device which had long since disappeared in Scots poetry, though he does retain the difficult rime scheme in the octave. More important, Ramsay, in all three cantos, changes the bobwheel ending of the original stanza, doing away with the two-line bobwheel refrain of *Christis Kirk*, *Peblis, Symmie and his Bruder*, and Scott's *Justing*, and replacing it with a simple dimeter tag-line which ends always with the words "that day." This simplified form of the *Christis Kirk* stanza Ramsay took from James Watson's printing of the poem in his *Choice Collection* (1706). The form had first appeared fifteen years earlier in Bishop Gibson's edition of 1691. Where Gibson got his text is unknown, but he probably used an ephemeral broadside version of the late seventeenth century which incorporated this innovation in the stanza form. The suggestion for the new and briefer "that day" refrain certainly came from Scott's *Justing*. We have already noted how Scott used the refrains "Up at the Drum that day" and "Up at Dalkeith that day," which

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he in turn adapted from stanzas 2 and 22 of *Christis Kirk* (Bannatyne test), where the two words "that day" are added to the normal refrain, and from stanzas 6 and 9 of the same poem where "that day" occurs as the bob line. At any rate, the simplified bobwheel, which Ramsay took over and popularized, is extremely effective with this verse form. It immediately became the standard eighteenth-century form of the *Christis Kirk* stanza, and was adopted by all of Ramsay's successors in the genre.

Ramsay's contribution to the *Christis Kirk* tradition may be summed up briefly. The widespread publicity which he gave to the genre through his repeated publications of both the original *Christis Kirk* and his own sequels helped to develop a new and broader audience for such poems. Ramsay's own cantos are, as we have noted, marked by a rather affected antiquarian flavor; and as such his work is a symptom of a nation on the defensive against cultural assimilation, turning back to its past for inspiration and for refreshing its sense of national identity. But in the hands of succeeding generations of poets who were attracted to the *Christis Kirk* form by the great success of Ramsay's venture, the genre gradually lost this antiquarian emphasis, and eventually, with Fergusson and Burns, became completely adapted to contemporary themes and artistic purposes. Had it not been for Ramsay, however, these later developments would probably never have occurred. The length of Ramsay's cantos was also significant. After *Polemo-Middinia* the *Christis Kirk* poems had been getting shorter and less substantial. Ramsay, by writing two ambitious sequels comparable in length to the prototypes of the tradition, reversed this trend and re-established the *Christis Kirk* type as a major genre. Finally, by adopting an adroit simplification of the bobwheel, Ramsay modified the traditional stanza and thus made it a more attractive and manageable medium for modern Scottish poets.

The example set by Allan Ramsay was soon followed by other writers of less note. In the generation between Ramsay and Fergusson two minor poets, David Nicol and John Skinner, tried their hands at the *Christis Kirk* genre. Nicol, an obscure schoolmaster, composed a sequel to Ramsay's sequel, entitled *Christis Kirk on the Green, Canto IV*, which he published in a volume of his collected poems in 1766.⁹ The time of actual composition is unknown, but the piece probably dates from about 1750. Nicol's poem takes up where Ramsay's Canto III left off, and describes the events of the following day: the "kirking" of the bride and groom, and the post-nuptial banquet at which a rather forced and

⁹ *Poems on Several Subjects, Both Comical and Serious* (Edinburgh), pp. 47-53.

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insipid altercation ensues between several of the villagers before harmony and general good will prevail at the end.

Poetically speaking, Nicol's canto is a dull and worthless performance, as the tortured opening stanza shows:

When Phoebus, wi' his gauden beams,	
Bang'd in the light of day,	
And glittering on the silder [sic] streams	<i>silver</i>
That thro' the valleys stray,	
The couthy carles, frae their dreams,	<i>affable old men</i>
Began to rax, and say,	<i>stretch</i>
Up drowsy herds; herds Phoebus blames	
That made so short a stay	
Away that day.	

The preposterous way in which Nicol introduces neo-classical "poetic diction" into this context hardly needs comment, to say nothing of the ungrammatical use of "glittering" instead of "glittered," and the absurdity of his having the "herds" (shepherd lads of the village) blame "Phoebus" for staying away for too short a time. The poem is full of this kind of appalling artificiality, Nicol's clumsy English style clashing agonizingly with his Scots vernacular. At one point in the dialogue (stanza 9) he even has the good-wives of the village talking about embracing "Venus' laws!" In everything but his style, Nicol follows Ramsay slavishly, and manages to drag into his poem, very self-consciously, virtually every character mentioned in both the original *Christis Kirk* and in Ramsay, with all kinds of allusions to things that have happened in the earlier cantos. But Nicol's style is all his own.

As a continuator of the *Christis Kirk* tradition, the Reverend John Skinner was a good deal more successful than his contemporary David Nicol. Through most of his long lifetime (1721-1807), Skinner was an Episcopal minister at Longside, Aberdeenshire, and an amateur poet of considerable ability, being the author of, among other things, the famous song of *Tullochgorum*. He was an ardent student of Scots poetry from a very early age, as he reveals in a letter to his friend Robert Burns, dated November 14, 1787, where he declares: "It is as old a thing as I remember, my fondness for 'Chryste-Kirk on the Green,' which I had by heart ere I was twelve years of age, and which, some years ago, I attempted to turn into Latin verse."¹⁰ Skinner's Latin translation of *Christis Kirk* here referred to, was a work of his later years. But much earlier in his career Skinner had produced a more important and original contribution to the tradition in the form of a long poem called *The*

¹⁰ "Biographical Sketch" by H. G. Reid in *Songs and Poems by the Rev. John Skinner* (Peterhead, Scotland, 1859), p. xxx.

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Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing,¹¹ written about 1739 when Skinner was seventeen and assistant schoolmaster at Monymusk, Aberdeenshire. Skinner makes no mention of this work in his letters to Burns; but Burns certainly knew the poem well, since there is a distinct echo of it in *Tam O'Shanter*.¹²

The Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing is a substantial poem of some thirty-four nine-line stanzas. The ideas for the poem was undoubtedly suggested to Skinner by Ramsay's continuations of *Christis Kirk*. Skinner uses Ramsay's form of the stanza, with the simplified bobwheel ending in "that day;" but, unlike Ramsay, he frequently introduces alliteration, probably because of his fondness for the original fifteenth-century *Christis Kirk* with its heavy alliterative pattern. For his subject, Skinner takes a typical *Christis Kirk* activity, a rough-and-tumble football game which was traditionally played by the villagers of Monymusk in the local churchyard during the Christmas season. The poet describes a long series of personal encounters during the game as a result of which most of the players end up with barked shins, sprained ankles, bloody noses, bruised heads, and so forth. These incidents are related briefly one after another, and are all of the same kind, becoming, in fact, a little monotonous toward the end. In its style, *The Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing* is generally competent and fairly vigorous in spots, though its wit and spirit flag from time to time. One of the interesting features of Skinner's manner is that he introduces touches of local Aberdeenshire dialect, as in his use of "bleedy" for "bloody" in this final stanza, which may serve as a fair sample of the whole:

Has ne'er in Monymuss been seen	
Sae mony weel-beft skins:	<i>beaten</i>
Of a' the bawmen there was nane	<i>football players</i>
But had twa bleedy shins.	
Wi' strenzied shouders mony ane	<i>sprained</i>
Dree'd penance for their sins;	<i>endured</i>
And what was warst, scoup'd hame at e'en,	
May be to hungry inns,	
And cauld that day.	

In this stanza, and throughout the poem, Skinner indicates an Aberdeenshire pronunciation in his spelling only very sparingly, and only in words such as "bleedy" where the meaning would be clear to the general reader. He carefully avoids broader northeastern dialectal forms, such

¹¹ *Songs and Poems*, pp. 1-12.

¹² Compare Skinner: "Like bumbees bizzing frae a byke,/ Whan hirds their riggins tirr" (stanza 2), with Burns: "As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke,/ When plundering herds assail their byke" (*Tam O'Shanter*, ll. 193-194).

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as "fat" for "what," so that his poem is in standard Scots with only a judicious sprinkling of Aberdeenshire.

The Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing is a very creditable work for a young man of seventeen. It shows a solid artistic competence and is infinitely superior to Nicol's poem. Once this has been said, however, one must admit that on the whole the work is little more than competent. Though there are a number of good humorous touches, such as the picture of the absent-minded "dominie" (Skinner himself) wandering onto the field of play and being promptly bowled over, the poem lacks the brilliance and the tempo necessary to sustain interest in so long a work. In boldness and vigor of execution, Skinner falls somewhat short of Ramsay and far short of the original *Christis Kirk*, though he borrows occasional phrases and special effects from both.

But although *The Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing* is only a fair performance artistically, from a historical point of view it has interest and importance in two respects. In the first place, and quite obviously, it is an ambitious poem in the pure *Christis Kirk* tradition, written under the influence of Allan Ramsay. As such, it helped to perpetuate the genre, to further Ramsay's work in giving new impetus to the whole tradition. Secondly, Skinner's poem represents an attempt to domesticate the *Christis Kirk* tradition in eighteenth-century Scotland. Ramsay and Nicol had used more or less generalized scenes and characters with an antiquarian emphasis. But Skinner here portrays a specific celebration (which he has actually witnessed), in a specific place (Monymusk), with some touches of the local dialect actually used there. In other words, Skinner is here working away from the Ramsayesque continuations of the original *Christis Kirk*, and instead is using the genre as a vehicle for a specific, local, and contemporary subject. He does not go all the way in this direction, as we have seen exemplified in his timid introduction of Aberdeenshire dialect; but the tendency is certainly there, a tendency which was to have great importance in rejuvenating the whole *Christis Kirk* tradition, in making it a fresh and vital instrument in the hands of Fergusson and Burns.

Robert Fergusson

The first half of the eighteenth century, then, had seen the vigorous revival of vernacular Scots poetry, stimulated by the pioneering work of Allan Ramsay and the anthologists, and, along with it, a marked upsurge of creative activity in the ancient *Christis Kirk* genre in the hands of Ramsay, Nicol, and Skinner. But although the generation after Ramsay

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brought forth a host of new writers in the mother tongue, no single poet of Ramsay's stature emerged during the long period from about 1730 to 1770. As a result, by 1770 the whole movement initiated by Ramsay appeared to be in danger of disintegration in the absence of powerful new leadership. This danger, however, was wiped out in the year 1772 by the sudden rise of a compelling new voice in Scots poetry. In that year in Edinburgh an obscure young lawyer's clerk named Robert Fergusson (1750-74) began to publish in Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine* a series of brilliant Scots poems which brought him almost immediate recognition as the legitimate successor to Ramsay. Fergusson's splendid contribution to Scots poetry, achieved in the incredibly brief span of two years, 1772-73 (he died in 1774 at the age of twenty-four), is only today beginning to be recognized at its full value. Eclipsed as he was almost immediately by Burns, Fergusson has long been slighted by critics and historians of literature, treated most often as an obscure "fore-runner" of Burns. Under recent revaluations,¹³ however, Fergusson's rare genius is finally coming into its own; and he is being given his rightful place as, second only to Burns, the most brilliant and powerful of eighteenth-century Scottish poets.

Fergusson wrote three major poems on the *Christis Kirk* tradition—*Hallow-fair* (to be clearly distinguished from the song *Hallowfair* treated earlier), *Leith Races*, and *The Election*¹⁴—all of which deserve detailed attention. The *Christis Kirk* genre was, in fact, an ideal medium of expression for Fergusson since it called for the lively, swift-paced method of description at which he particularly excelled.

Hallow-fair, Fergusson's first attempt in the genre, was composed in the fall of 1772 and first published in the *Weekly Magazine* on November 12. The poem is a substantial one of thirteen stanzas, describing the bustling goings-on at a fair which was held annually in

¹³ E.g., John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London, 1940); David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (New York, 1950), and "Eighteenth-Century Vernacular Poetry" in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London, 1955), ed. Jas. Kinsley; *Robert Fergusson, 1750-1774* (Bicentennial Essays) ed. Sydney Goodsir Smith (Edinburgh, 1952); Matthew P. McDiarmid ed. *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, Scottish Text Soc., 3rd Ser. 21 (Edinburgh, 1954), Vol. I (Introduction); and Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958).

¹⁴ For the best texts of these poems, see *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid, STS, 3rd Ser. 24 (Edinburgh, 1956), II, 89-93, 160-167, 185-190.

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November near Edinburgh. It is organized structurally in four main sections: the first stanza briefly introduces the subject and sets the scene; in stanzas 2 to 8 the poet sketches the various characters at the fair and their activities: young girls seeking boy friends, "browsters" (brewers), country farmers, "chapmen billies" (peddlers), recruiting sergeants, horses, and so forth; stanzas 9 to 12 deal with the notorious City Guard of Edinburgh (a favorite object of Fergusson's satire) and their rough treatment of "Jock Bell," a drunkard; and the poem ends with a whimsical stanza warning against the consequences of overindulgence. Fergusson presents these animated scenes one after the other with dazzling rapidity. Almost before the reader has time to relish one lively little sketch he is rushed on to the next, and the next. The effect is cumulative; the individual pictures pile up to create a wonderfully rich impression of the fair as a whole, full of life, motion, color, noise, and general confusion. *Hallow-fair* is cleverly organized to give this overall effect, though there is a somewhat overly abrupt change of pace and subject in the second stanza. The transition at the beginning of stanza 9, however, from the fair itself to the later activities of the evening and to the City Guard, is smooth and adroit.

Fergusson's opening stanza is one of the most beautifully balanced in the poem, and demonstrates his facile mastery of the difficult *Christis Kirk* stanza:

At <i>Hallowmas</i> , whan nights grow lang,	
And <i>starnies</i> shine fu' clear,	<i>stars</i>
Whan fock, the nippin cold to bang,	<i>defeat</i>
Their winter <i>hap-warms</i> wear,	<i>mantles</i>
Near Edinbrough a fair there hads,	<i>holds</i>
I wat there's nane whase name is,	
For strappin dames and sturdy lads,	
And cap and stoup, mair famous	<i>cup; drinking jug</i>
Than it that day.	

This stanza is notable for its lightness, for the easy natural flow which Fergusson achieves in spite of the complexity of his sentence structure. The poet makes skillful use of the rime scheme to clarify his grammatical pattern: the rime of "whase name is" and "mair famous," an ingenious and playful stroke in itself, pulls together the basic structure of the sentence after a series of interrupters, and helps to make its meaning instantly clear. This stanza, incidentally, is similar in content to the openings of both *Christis Kirk* and *Peblis*. Fergusson was certainly familiar with the original *Christis Kirk*, together with Ramsay's sequels

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and *Polemo-Middinia*, and probably also with Scott's *Justing*, *The Blyth-some Bridal*,¹⁵ and, possibly, with the work of Nicol and Skinner. But although Fergusson had apparently studied the earlier *Christis Kirk* poems with care, his own handling of the form is fresh and independent. Ramsay, Nicol, and Skinner had all exploited suggestions and stylistic effects from earlier works in the genre; but Fergusson's effects are inimitably his own. In this connection, it will be seen that Fergusson here introduces an important modification of the stanza. Though he uses Ramsay's simplified bobwheel, he breaks with tradition in having four instead of two rimes in the octave, that is, ABAB/CDCD/E, instead of ABAB/ABAB/C, an innovation which Burns was to adopt in *Hallowe'en* and *The Holy Fair*.

Stanza 2 begins with a precise and suggestive image depicting sunrise over Edinburgh, but is marred by a sudden shift in the middle from the "trig made [spruce] maidens" to the "browsters rare" (brewers), which is slightly disconcerting in its abruptness and constitutes the single structural blemish in the poem. The lines on the "browsters," taken by themselves, are, however, inimitable:

At Hallow-fair, whare browsters rare	
Keep gude ale on the gantries,	<i>shelves</i>
And dinna scrimp ye o' a skair	<i>share</i>
O' kebbucks frae their pantries,	<i>cheeses</i>
Fu' saut that day.	<i>salty</i>

The internal rime in the first line combines with the artfully placed alliteration in the second and third to give the passage a swinging, rollicking dash, while the sudden change of pace and pitch in the tag-line is effected with superb artistry. Apparently, the brewers of Edinburgh during the festive season of Hallow Fair had a trick of providing free snacks of cheese especially prepared for the occasion and highly seasoned with thirst-provoking *salt*, to whet the appetites of their customers. Hence the phrase, "Fu' saut that day." Fergusson's handling of the tag-line in this and in the preceding stanza reveals, moreover, his technical versatility and his sure control of the *Christis Kirk* form. In stanza 1, the tag-line, "Than it that day," is necessary to complete the sense of the stanza, and rounds it off smoothly and effectively. In stanza 2, however, the tag-line is not an integral part of the grammati-

¹⁵ Fergusson must have read *Christis Kirk*, Scott's *Justing*, and *The Blyth-some Bridal* either in Watson's *Choice Collection* (1706-1711) or in Ramsay's *Poems* (1721) or *Ever Green* (1724). That he was familiar with *Polemo-Middinia* is certain from his use of a passage from it as motto for his poem, *The King's Birthday in Edinburgh*. Of all the major *Christis Kirk* poems only *Peblis* was inaccessible to Fergusson (it was not printed until 1783).

cal structure; it gives the impression of an afterthought following a long pause, and involves not only an abrupt slowing down of the rapid rhythm of the stanza, but also a change in pitch. The words, "Fu' saut that day," should be viewed as a kind of dramatic "aside," and should be enunciated slowly, in a low, insinuating tone of voice so as to bring out the rich flavor of the satire. The irresistibly comic effect which Fergusson here achieves is, of course, only one out of many brilliantly imaginative touches in *Hallow-fair*; but it is worth analyzing and emphasizing as an example of Fergusson's cunning sense of style. It is in just such details that his peculiar charm and distinction as a poet lie. The line bears the unmistakable stamp of Fergusson's literary personality; he takes the reader into his confidence, as it were, and comments intimately and imaginatively on the scene.

Ye silly coof! *fool*
Be o' your gab mair spairin . . .

Here Sawny cries, frae Aberdeen;
 "Come ye to me fa need: *who*
 "The brawest *shanks* that e'er were seen
 "I'll sell ye cheap an' guid . . ."

Out spak the weirlike corporal, *warlike*
 "Pring in ta drunken sot."

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In this full blown use of local dialects Fergusson surpasses the cautious introduction of Aberdeenshire which we have noted in Skinner's *Monymusk Christmas B'ing*. Finally, the poet renders beautifully the ludicrous comment of Jock Bell, the drunkard who has been brutally felled by a blow from a "stark Lochaber aix," the dread weapon of the City Guard:

"Ohon!" quo' he, "I'd rather be	
"By sword or bagnet stickit,	<i>bayonet</i>
"Than hae my crown or body wi'	
"Sic deadly weapons nicket."	<i>such</i>

The conclusion to *Hallow-fair* is equally effective. In stanza 12 Fergusson clinches his cutting satire of the Guard, urging "good fock" to "bide yont frae this black squad;" and in a final brilliant stanza he recommends moderation:

A wee soup drink dis unco weel	<i>sip; does very</i>
To had the heart aboon;	<i>hold; above</i>
It's good as lang's a canny chiel	<i>shrewd fellow</i>
Can stand steeve in his shoon.	<i>steadily; shoes</i>
But gin a birkie's owr weel sair'd,	<i>if; fellow; served</i>
It gars him aften stammer	<i>makes; stagger</i>
To ploys that bring him to the guard,	<i>tricks</i>
An' eke the Council-chawmir,	<i>also; chamber</i>
Wi' shame that day.	

These lines show Fergusson in his finest vein. They have the natural rhythm, and racy colloquial diction of living speech, and yet conform exactly to the metrical pattern. His collocation of vowel sounds in this stanza give it a sprightly lilting effect which contrasts pleasingly with the harsher sound patterns of the preceding stanzas, bringing the poem to a happy close on a note of whimsical humor.

Of all Fergusson's works, *Hallow-fair* is certainly one of the best and most characteristic. It is filled with vigor, dash, and pulsating life, and with Fergusson's typical gaiety, his rich humor. The imaginative brilliance of the poem never falters; there are virtually no stylistic blunders. And in the history of the *Christis Kirk* tradition, *Hallow-fair* is important in three respects. For one thing, Fergusson here makes a major change in the rime scheme of the traditional stanza, a change which gives it greater flexibility, makes it less confining. Secondly, and most significantly, Fergusson in *Hallow-fair* extends the subject matter and changes the emphasis of the *Christis Kirk* genre. All of the earlier poems in the tradition had dealt exclusively with rural or village life and peasant character. *Hallow-fair* is the first to portray city life. Edinburgh in Fergusson's time, of course, with its small area and

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incredibly crowded conditions, was open to the country on all sides; it was a peculiarly intimate community in which folk of all classes rubbed shoulders and shared cramped lodgings in the tall "lands" or tenements. And life in "Auld Reekie," closely related as it was to the surrounding farming area, was a far cry indeed from life in our great, aloof, mechanized cities of today. Nevertheless, it was a more complex and infinitely more varied kind of life than we find portrayed in any of the *Christis Kirk* poems before Fergusson. Furthermore, Fergusson here breaks completely with the Ramsay tendency to portray generalized characters and old-fashioned manners with a nostalgic or antiquarian emphasis, and gives us instead a lively picture of contemporary life in his beloved Edinburgh as he observed it, keenly and imaginatively, hitting off real characters, making his bold satiric thrusts at the City Guard, and so forth. In short, Fergusson in *Hallow-fair* brought the *Christis Kirk* tradition up to date. Finally, in *Hallow-fair* Fergusson produced a poem which, in its imaginative boldness, sensitive humor, and technical brilliance, surpasses, I think, any single poem in the *Christis Kirk* tradition before it with the exception of the original *Christis Kirk* and *Peblis*.

Fergusson's two later efforts in the *Christis Kirk* genre—*Leith Races* and *The Election*—are, if anything, even more impressive as works of art than *Hallow-fair*. *Leith Races*, which appeared in the *Weekly Magazine* on July 22, 1773, is a kind of companion piece to *Hallow-fair*, but is considerably longer (20 stanzas). Like Fergusson's earlier masterpiece, the poem describes a festival in Edinburgh. The *Leith Races*, the social highlight of the summer season in Auld Reekie, were an annual series of horse-races held during an entire week in July, with elaborate civic ceremonies, on Leith Sands about three miles from the city. The citizens of Edinburgh flocked *en masse* down to Leith in holiday mood to witness the festivities, and Fergusson here gives a vivid and exuberant picture, touched with inimitable satire, of the whole crowded and boisterous scene.

In structure, *Leith Races* falls into four main divisions. The first five stanzas form the introduction, and present the poet's meeting and conversation with "Mirth," the mythological figure who offers to take him to the "Races" and show him the amusing sights to be found there. In stanzas 6 to 13 Fergusson depicts the various types of people preparing to go to the Races or on their way there: the fashionable ladies dressing up for the occasion; the barking peddlers hawking "true an' faithfu' lists" of the horses running that day; the City Guardsmen being shaved and inspected for the Races; the drunken "tinkler billies"

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reeling down Leith Walk; and, finally, the "browster wives" busily getting out their cheapest and sourest ale and whiskey, which, in spite of its poor quality, is sure to sell during this thirsty season. In stanzas 14 to 19 we are given vivid glimpses of the tumultuous scene on Leith Sands, where "Buchan bodies" cry their fish through the crowds, dishonest gamblers huddle over games of dice and "rowly pow!" (ninepins), horses and carriages dash to and fro in every direction, the town-guard lines up the horses for the races, and young fellows from the Robinhood debating club engage in "lang and dreech contesting." In stanza 20 Fergusson closes the poem, describing the drunken aftermath of the Races and ending on a humorous note of warning against the City Guard. The structural method here is Fergusson's usual one of lighting up carefully chosen dramatic details picked out from the general confusion with unerring skill to give a lively and concrete impression of the whole. More specifically, it is the method he had used with great success in *Hallow-fair*, though here he gives a fuller and more detailed picture.

Though *Leith Races* is too long and complex a poem to permit a thorough-going analysis, one or two typical stanzas may be singled out for comment. It is no wonder that Burns was fascinated by the vision of "Mirth," for the passage is one of the most delightful ones in all Fergusson. The poet gives to this abstraction a most engaging and natural character perfectly adapted to the humorous context of the piece as a whole. His "Mirth," a charming, vivacious creature, contrasts significantly with the pompous abstract figures usually found in philosophical "vision" poetry, a poetic tradition which Fergusson may here be incidentally satirizing. At any rate, the fifth stanza, where Fergusson agrees to accompany "Mirth" to the Races, is especially vigorous, full of zest and sparkle:

A bargain be't, and, by my feggs,	<i>faith</i>
Gif ye will be my mate,	
Wi' you I'll screw the cheery pegs,	<i>tune the fiddle</i>
Ye shanna find me blate;	<i>shy</i>
We'll reel an' ramble thro' the sands,	
And jeer wi' a' we meet;	
Nor hip the daft and gleesome bands	<i>miss</i>
That fill EDINA'S street	<i>Edinburgh's</i>
Sae thrang this day.	<i>crowded</i>

These lines have a swift, exhilarating rhythm to them; they sing their way into the memory, aided by the alliteration in lines 1 and 5 and the recurrence of the "ee" sound throughout. The superb craftsmanship of

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this stanza is matched in the passage (stanzas 8 to 10) on the inevitable City Guard. Stanza 8, describing the guardsmen getting spruced up for the Races, demands quotation:

To WHISKY PLOOKS that brunt for wooks	<i>pimples; burned; weeks</i>
On town-guard soldiers faces,	
Their barber bauld his whittle crooks,	<i>razor</i>
An' scrapes them for the races:	
Their STUMPS erst us'd to <i>filipegs</i> ,	<i>legs; kilts</i>
Are dight in spaterdashes	<i>dressed</i>
Whase barkent hides scarce fend their legs	<i>encrusted</i>
Frae weet, and weary plashes	<i>splashes</i>
O' dirt that day.	

This stanza shows Fergusson at his liveliest, lashing out at his old enemy, the Guard, in bold and irresistibly comic style. His use of internal rime in the first line, "To WHISKY PLOOKS that brunt for wooks," deftly sets the tone of impish mockery, a tone that is sustained through his alliterative phrases ("barber bauld," "weet and weary," "dirt that day"). The reference to "their barber bauld" is a fine artistic touch, a perfect choice of epithet, striking as it does the precise note of mock-heroic satire which Fergusson is aiming at. The entire passage on the Guard is powerfully and imaginatively conceived and executed with subtle artistry. Though Fergusson does not sustain this high level of excellence in all twenty stanzas of his poem, he never drops far below it; *Leith Races* is, in fact, the most consistently brilliant of his longer poems. Fergusson's facile mastery of Scots idiom and his sensitive grasp of poetic technique are nowhere more evident.

In *Leith Races* Fergusson produced a comic extravaganza of Edinburgh social life, similar to his earlier *Hallow-fair*. But soon after, in *The Election*, his last contribution to the *Christis Kirk* tradition, he broke new ground in adapting the genre as a vehicle for political as well as social satire. This fine poem, which is not as well known as it deserves to be, first appeared in Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine* on September 16, 1773, over the signature: "R. Fergusson. *Auld Reikie*, Sept. 13." The poem contains fifteen *Christis Kirk* stanzas with a further modification of the form. We have noted that Fergusson broke with tradition in using a four-rime octave in *Hallow-fair* and *Leith Races*. In this piece he attempts a compromise, introducing three rimes instead of two or four in the octave, thereby linking the rime schemes of the two quatrains as follows: ABAB/ACAC/D. None of Fergusson's critics and commentators seems to have noticed this interesting variation in *The Election*.

This poem describes part of a complicated municipal election in

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Edinburgh—the choosing of the fourteen “deacons,” each of whom represented one of the incorporated “trades” of Edinburgh on the Town Council.¹⁶ Fergusson here employs the same structural method which he had used successfully in *Hallow-fair*, *Leith Races*, and other poems. He introduces his theme in the first stanza, suggesting the wild conviviality of the election. In stanzas 2 to 5 he draws two masterly sketches of tradesmen getting ready to go to the customary feast at “Walker’s” given by the victorious deacons. Stanzas 6 to 8 describe the uninhibited goings-on at the feast itself; then in the next group of four stanzas Fergusson illustrates the drunken aftermath of the affair as deacons and tradesmen stagger home. In stanzas 13 and 14, we see unscrupulous politicians bribing voters, and new deacons being formally instated. And in his final stanza Fergusson comments whimsically on the tremendous strain which all the heavy drinking of election time puts on the constitutions of those involved, especially the deacons themselves.

The style of *The Election* may be illustrated briefly. The opening scene of the poem (stanzas 2 and 3), where we see and hear the pompous, domineering citizen getting dressed up for the deacons’ dinner, is among Fergusson’s most delightful and inimitable passages:

Haste, EPPS, quo’ John, an’ bring my gez,	wig
Take tent ye dinna’t spulzie:	beed; spoil
Last night the barber ga’t a friz,	curl
An’ straiokit it wi’ ulzie.	stroked; oil
Hae done your PARITCH lassie Liz,	porridge
Gi’e me my sark an’ gravat;	shirt; tie
I’se be as braw’s the Deacon is	
Whan he taks AFFIDAVIT	
O’ FAITH the day.	
Whar’s Johnny gaun, cries neebor BESS,	
That he’s sae gayly bodin	furnished
Wi’ new kam’d wig, weel syndet face,	combed; washed
Silk hose, for hamely hodin?	homespun
“Our Johny’s nae sma’ drink you’ll guess,	
“He’s trig as ony muir-cock,	spruce
“An’ forth to mak a Deacon, lass;	
“He downa speak to poor fock	cannot
Like us the day.”	

Here, in a few masterful strokes, and entirely through dialogue, Fergusson suggests the whole character of the man, his ludicrous vanity and

¹⁶ For a complete account of the procedure for Edinburgh municipal elections in the 18th century, see Hugo Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1816), pp. 391-394.

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self-importance. The taunting remarks of the neighbors in stanza 3, as Johnny steps forth starched and spruce in his unaccustomed finery, sound authentic and are perfectly calculated to drive home the satiric point of the sketch. The whole passage is concrete and dramatic in effect, showing Fergusson's astonishing ability to create lively characters in a few short lines. Equally remarkable is the superb naturalness of the dialogue, which rings true in spite of the exigencies of the difficult stanza form. This picture of "Johnny" contrasts neatly with the succeeding sketch of the "canty cobbler" in stanza 5, where Fergusson's style takes on a kindlier, almost pathetic tone, without losing anything of its trenchant, objective force. Here he pictures the poor fellow's enthusiasm as he looks forward to a hearty meal at the deacon's banquet, a refreshing change after months of drudgery and malnutrition. On this day alone he suddenly and temporarily becomes a person of importance, "a pow o' WIT and LAW," and can afford for a few triumphant hours to "taunt at soals an' heels," the humble symbols of his trade. The splendid verve of this opening section is well sustained through the description of the feast and its aftermath. The whole scene of enthusiastic gluttony, rowdiness, freakish wit, and bestiality is laid before us with relentless realism. In stanza 13 occurs one of many fine imaginative touches, where Fergusson pictures dishonest voters taking half-crown bribes from politicians. He observes that the recipients of this tainted money never stop to check the coins for correct weight:

They pouch the gowd, nor fash the town *gold; bother*
For weights an' scales to weigh them
Exact that day.

In this ingenious way Fergusson suggests to the imagination of his reader the darkness and furtiveness of these nefarious transactions: the voter quickly pockets his half-crown and slinks guiltily off. This kind of suggestiveness is highly characteristic of Fergusson's style in general.

On the whole, *The Election* is a very impressive piece of work, a daring satire full of exuberance and creative vitality. It is more purely satirical in purpose than either *Hallow-fair* or *Leith Races*, and gives evidence of Fergusson's characteristic fearlessness, his clear-sighted, objective vision in criticizing political as well as social abuses. The poem is, of course, primarily entertaining rather than didactic; but it does show that Fergusson was very much aware of the short-comings in the politics and society of his day and made conscious efforts to expose them in the light of his satiric imagination.

All in all, Fergusson's work in the *Christis Kirk* tradition has

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tremendous historical importance. For one thing, by writing three daringly original major poems in this genre Fergusson refreshed the whole tradition and demonstrated conclusively that the age-old *Christis Kirk* form was still a vital and adaptable one for modern Scots poets. Additionally, he modified the stanzaic form and extended the traditional subject matter of the genre to include town life and political satire; and he rescued the tradition from the Ramsay antiquarian tendency by showing how powerful the *Christis Kirk* medium could be for the treatment of specific contemporary scenes and issues. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, Fergusson produced three poems of really high artistic quality, poems which are distinguished for their vigor, gaiety, and compelling artistry, and which remain eminently readable today. He was, in short, the first eighteenth-century Scots poet to reveal the full potentialities of the genre, to show that first-rate, sophisticated poetry could be written in this form. In this respect, Fergusson left Ramsay and the others far behind, and established a new standard of high quality craftsmanship. And all of these features of Fergusson's work in the *Christis Kirk* tradition were to have a profound influence upon the practice of his immediate successor, Robert Burns.

(To be continued)

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